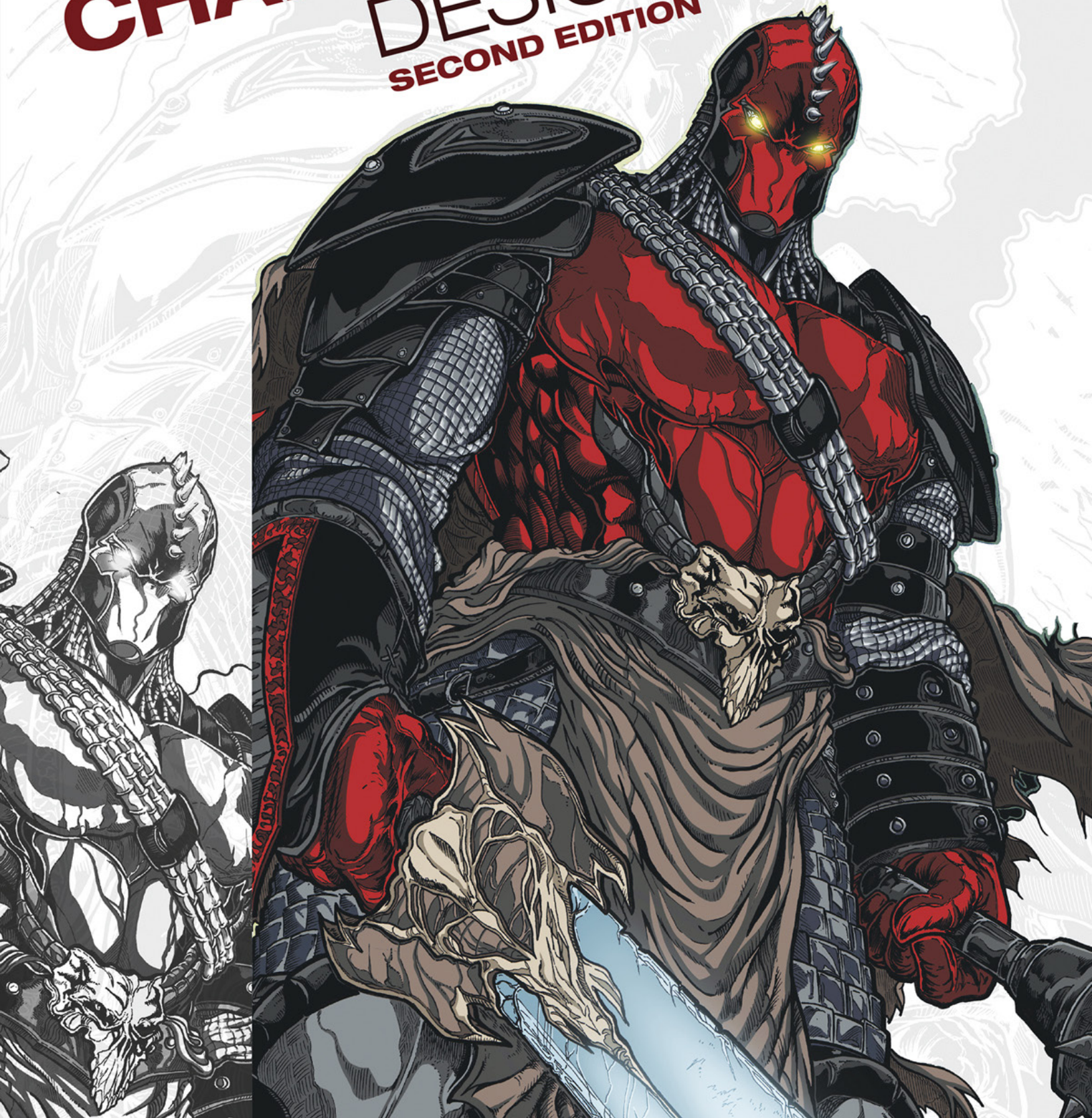
CREATIVE CHARACTER DESIGN

SECOND EDITION

BRYAN TILLMAN

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group
A FOCAL PRESS BOOK



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By
Bryan Tillman

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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife for always being my rock, to my children for being the motivation to do everything I do, and to my parents for being true teachers. Thank you all. I love you all very much.

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Foreword

CHARACTER BIO:

Name:
Bryan "Kaiser" Tillman

Age:
30, as of this writing

Height:
6 feet, 2 inches or 6 feet, 8 inches (including Afro)

Weight:
220 pounds

Build:
Fit, mesomorph

Nationality:
German-American

Birthplace:
Fort Hood, Texas

Alignment:
Lawful good (with a touch of chaos)

Weapons:
His Afro, a pencil, an ink pen, and anything ninja

Favorite Saying:
"You FAIL!"

Biography

How can I write this without making it sound like Bryan paid me to write it?

He didn't, really; he just asked. My answer? "Absolutely!"

Bryan lives his life with passion. He deeply loves his wife, really loves his kids, and sure as hell loves his craft. In the time that I have known him, I have watched Bryan put all of himself into everything he does. Outside of being a great husband and father and fulfilling the requirements of his day job, Bryan has attended every major convention I know of; designed, developed, and released an excellent fantasy card RPG; and managed to get his own convention up and running in the Washington, DC, area. He is like some kind of mad comics superhero.

The passion that Bryan has for his craft, Sequential Art, is second to none. It is that passion that is the origin of this book you hold in your hands. You see for years we have been squabbling amongst ourselves about the hollow materials that have been hitting the shelves or being released in theatres, but Bryan has been telling the masses. Why? Because he is passionate about it, so passionate that he wants you to learn how to do it right. (Okay, so I know that is improper grammar, but I think you get the point.) This book is the pathway

to success in the media and entertainment industries. When you look at the stories you like today, the movies you love, and the games you like to play, for the most part, the reasons you like them are unfolded here. Take this book. Read it. Listen to it. Apply it with the passion that Bryan has, and someday, when you are at the top of the mountain, remember the passion that Bryan "Kaiser" Tillman had, the passion that helped you build your foundation to success.

Alexander Buffalo

Credits

The art in this book was provided by the members of Kaiser Studio Productions. http://www.kaiserstudio.net.

Kaiser Studio Productions consists of:

Bryan "Kaiser" Tillman
Crystal Tillman
Elvin Hernandez
Alex Buffalo
Enrique Rivera
Jerald Lewis
Kenneth Hill II
Kevin Martin
Danny Araya
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What Makes for Good Character Design?

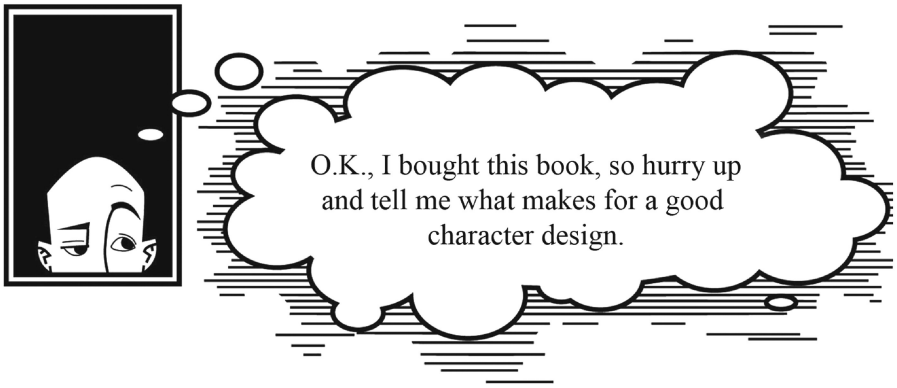
Hello everyone and welcome to *Creative Character Design*. Before we get started, there are two things that you need to know about this book.

ONE: This is and forever will be an introductory book to character design. I want to make sure that you know that going in so that you won't be disappointed by the end of this book. There are always nuggets of information that can be gleaned from any book, so no matter what skill level you are at with character design, there will be some information in this book that can help you with your future character design needs.

TWO: This is not a how-to-draw book. *Creative Character Design* is a book about the theory of character design and what elements and aspects need to be thought about before and during the drawing process. I try and pull back the curtain a little bit to give beginning designers a look at what makes some characters great and some characters meh.

Now that that is out of the way, and if you are still with me, why don't we jump right in to answering some questions that you might have.

At this point you might be thinking to yourself:



Well, I hate to have to tell you, but you are just going to have to read the whole book to find *that* out. Sorry. One thing I have learned in my years as a teacher is that the quick answer won't teach you anything in the long run. It is like cramming for a test. You know everything you need to know for the test, but then you forget everything the very next day. So, I'm not going to do you that disservice, but what I will do if you are in such a hurry is give you a brief overview of what this book is all about. So, sit back, relax, and enjoy this fast-paced, high-octane summary of creative character design. Are you all strapped in and have your helmet on? Great! Here we go!

When most people think about characters or character design, there are a few things that jump into their mind. From my experience, what most people think about is either the characters that captured their imagination as a child or one of the most recent characters that they have seen, played, or read. The main reason why we as humans will gravitate to a character that we remember from our childhood or from a more recent experience is because we either were on some level able to relate to the character or wanted to see ourselves in one of those character roles. Speaking of character roles, there are a few that most people instantly think of when talking about characters. Most people will say:

There needs to be a hero.

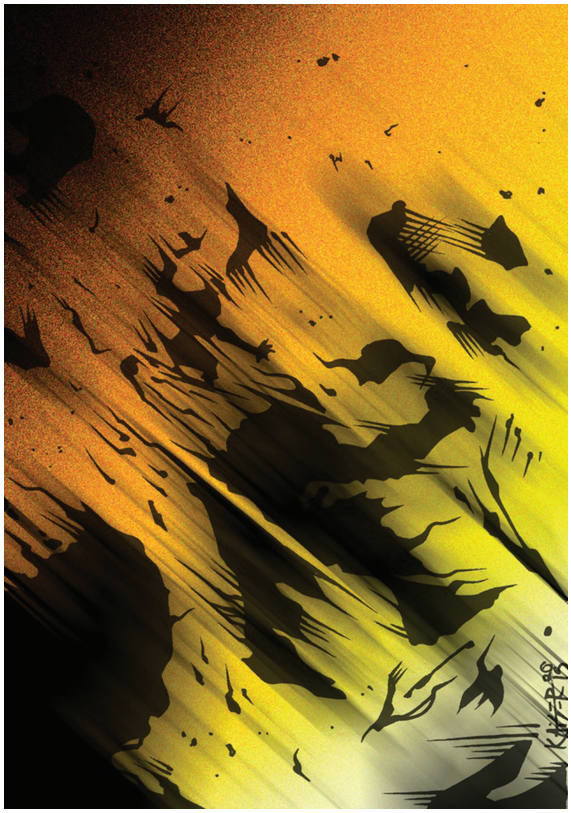
There needs to be a bad guy.

There needs to be a beautiful woman.

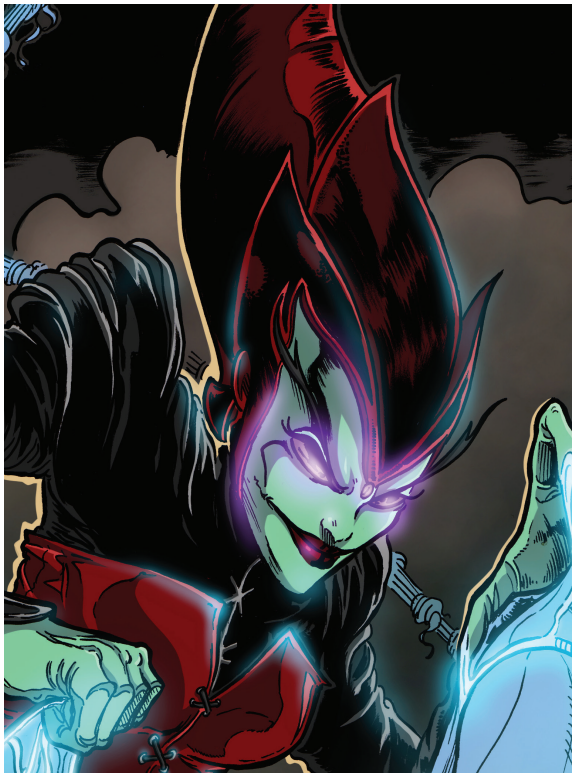
This is pretty much standard, but I know some of you are now yelling at the book:

"Hey, my hero is a ninja!"

or **"My bad guy is a situation, not an actual person!"**



or **“My villain is a woman!”**



Yes, you are allowed to have these variations; it is actually encouraged to think outside of the norm and create characters that are different. By adding variations, the world of character design will never grow stagnant.

PRO TIP!

Stay modern, stay fresh, constantly be paying attention to what is going on around you. Character designs are very “in the moment”; stale designs equal no work.

—Bun Leung

With that said, it has been my experience that, when given the task of creating characters, the first three are the most common. As you continue reading the book, we will get into variations of the initial thought process of character design. However, for the sake of this introduction, we are going to stick with these core principles.

The first step in good character design is these core principles, known as *archetypes*. Archetypes represent the personality and character traits that we as humans identify with. There are many different archetypes, but there are a common few that keep reoccurring in all types of stories. They are needed in order to propel a story forward, and it is the personal story of each character that makes for good character development.

Story is the second step to good character design. Even though it is the second thing mentioned, it is the most important. If you are willing to put in the time and effort to develop each character—their backstory and personality traits—before you start drawing, you will have a stronger and more well-rounded character design, which will in turn

strengthen the aesthetic of your character in the future. The thing that you as the character designer must remember is that the characters are *always* in service to the story—not now, nor will it ever be, the other way around.

I am sure that your blood is starting to boil, and you are asking:

"Wait a minute! I've created characters without a story before."

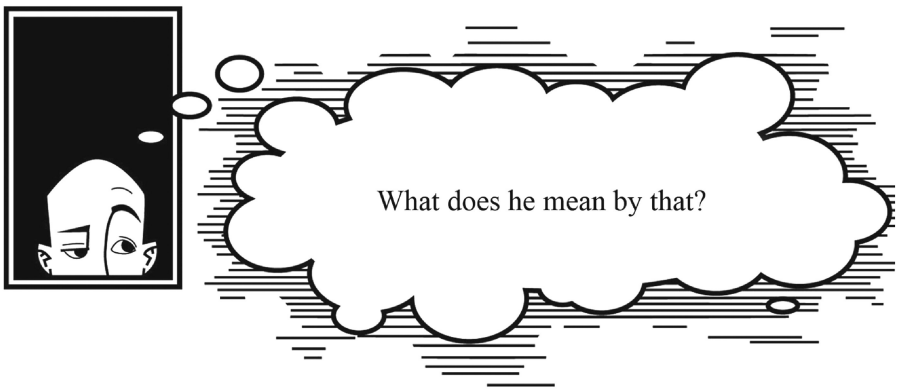
Yes, it is possible to draw a character without a story, and people do it all the time. The problem is, when you do that, and you want to keep the character, you always have to go back and create the story for that character. I don't know about you, but whenever I created the design of a character without writing his or her backstory first, the design of the character always changed once I wrote it. Has that ever happened to you? If you answered yes (which all of you should have), what you were subject to was:

The Character is *Always* in Service to the Story

The third step we are going to talk about is the idea of being *original*. When you are writing your backstory, it will be *impossible* to ignore the things around you. Whether you want to be or not, every day you are influenced by the things you see, hear, and do. That is why it is so hard to come up with an original idea. I'm not saying that it is impossible, but it is really, *really* hard to do. Have you ever heard this before?

"Oh, that story sounds great. It reminds me of the other story."

If that has happened to you, don't get discouraged. It's perfectly okay. The only thing you need to remember is that you bring some form of originality to the table.



Well, you are just going to have to read the chapter on originality to find that one out.

Moving right along, the fourth step to good character design that we cover in this book is *shapes*. That's right—shapes. Shapes play a big role in character design. They visually can tell a lot about a character and their story. How is that possible, you ask? Well, every shape has a meaning behind it. If you are thinking in terms of a basic square, circle, or triangle, it might not make too much sense, but when you start tweaking these shapes, they tell a story. What do you think this character is all about?

Did you notice you were coming up with a story based on the armor, the helmet, and the weapons? All those have distinctive shapes that were chosen to tell a story about this character visually. Shapes also give us the means to talk about silhouettes and functionality, which we will talk about in depth later in another chapter.

The fifth step—*reference*—is one of my favorites. The topic of using reference is what plagues my students the most. Here are some of the most common statements I hear when talking about reference:

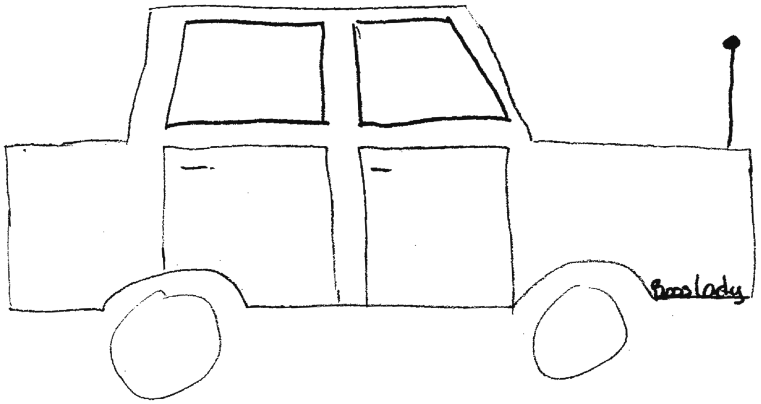
"I already know how to draw a tree, so I don't need reference."
"I couldn't find exactly what I was looking for, so I just made it up."
"Isn't using reference cheating?"

Here are my responses to the three statements above.

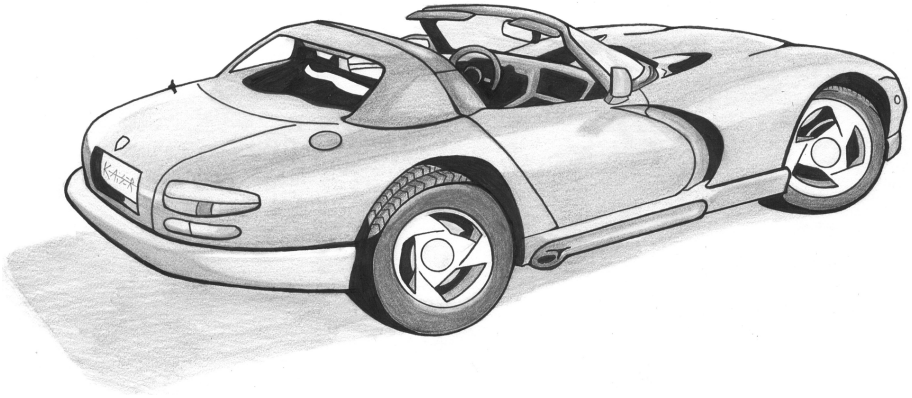
"Yeah, you do."
"You have got to be kidding me."
"Let's see. All of the pros use reference, so … *no*! Now stop being stupid!"

I know the last statement might have been a bit harsh, but let me explain. It is one thing to use reference, and it is another thing to let the reference use you. *Don't copy your reference!* If you are going to do that, then you might as well just take a photograph and save yourself some time. Reference is very important to character designers and, well, artists in general.

You might think you know how to draw everything in the world, but trust me—you don't. Here is an example: ask somebody to draw a car and see what that person comes up with. Anyone can draw something that resembles a car, for example:



Now ask somebody to draw a Dodge Viper.



There are two ways the drawing will be accurate. One is that the artist is a Dodge Viper fanatic and eats, sleeps, and dreams Dodge Vipers, and the other is that the artist got the proper reference before creating the drawing.

From that we move on to the sixth step: *aesthetic*. This is the one that the majority of all character designers go after first. The aesthetic is the look of the character. Since we are mainly talking about a visual medium, this is a very important subject. The way a character looks determines whether the viewer likes, dislikes, connects with, sympathizes with, or anything else. There are many things to consider when thinking about aesthetic, for example:

What style should be used when creating this character?
What colors should be used?
What medium is this character going to be used for?
Who is the character's audience?

These are some of the questions that need to be answered before you get to the final piece. If any of these questions are answered after the final design is created, then I can guarantee you that changes will be made to your design. This is extremely important to the success of your character design, and we will cover it in full detail in a later chapter. (I know you want to look. Go ahead, I'll wait. Just make sure you come back.)

Welcome back! Okay, let's finish this up with a brief summary of the final step. The last subject deals with something I like to call the *WOW factor*. Every design needs to have this. Every designer wants this in his or her designs. What is the WOW factor, you ask? Well, I'm not going to tell you yet. You will have to read the entire book to fully understand it.

There is one thing, however, that I *will* tell you: Once you've read this book, you will have the knowledge to create eye-popping, jaw-dropping character designs. So, what are you waiting for? Times a ticking. Go on to the next chapter!

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